

Sitting Out the Cold

The day before the rifle deer season opener brought snow to the Chippewa National Forest. A long line of traffic made its way north on slippery roads, campers and 4-wheelers in tow as folks headed out to their camps.

A wind blew much of the opening weekend, and it was chilly enough to make me wish for warmer times. Young enough to celebrate such things, the neighbor kids put on their orange and built snowmen.



I like to head to my deer stand in the dark and watch the morning come. Despite the cloudy skies preventing any kind of a moon, I had no need for a light. The snow brightened things up enough to walk.

In fact, it brightened things up enough for me to see tracks. There were deer tracks in abundance where I was headed. It gave me hope. And yet, whenever I passed beneath a conifer tree, I couldn't help but think how inviting the cover must be to an animal that lives through all kinds of weather. A place to get out of the wind. A sort of 'roof' over your head.

My stand is nestled against the backdrop of a balsam thicket. The trees have grown over the years, and they not only break the wind to my back, but branches reach out above me. Years ago I was asked if I would appreciate a roof on my stand. I declined the opportunity, believing it is better to experience the weather when you are hunting. Sometimes I regret this decision. Usually when it is raining or snowing.

Huddled against the backdrop of my balsam thicket, I thought about the deer in their cozy beds, especially when they did not instantly appear in front of me. I kept reflecting on this when the wind picked up, and the branches above me began to unload their snow.

As the light grew in the woods, I could hear the rattle of a pileated woodpecker. A passing raven lets out a chortle as it flaps and glides, skimming over the trees. On the hunt for tasty gut piles, it's a good time for such a bird.

There's a red squirrel that lives in the balsam thicket behind me. In the darkness it is holed up in a cavity in the maple on the edge of the thicket. When daylight is strong enough, there's a scrabbling sound of squirrel claws against tree bark. Eventually it will make its way to a branch and start in on the scolding.

Red squirrels are highly territorial. The sign of this territoriality is the familiar drawn-out "cherr" call. You know morning has broken when the red squirrels in the area advertise their presence to each other with their scolding calls. From my deer stand, I have watched when one red squirrel

approaches another, and the chase is on. Around and around the trees they go, until eventually the intruder withdraws.

As it turns out, the territoriality of red squirrels revolves around their staple food source: conifer seeds. The seeds of spruce, fir, pine, and cedar are thought to be too small to be of much use if they are buried singly. Rather, a more economical approach is for the squirrel to harvest whole cones before they ripen and shed their seeds. A winter's worth of cones is then stored in one place, which is then defended against other squirrels. Red squirrels defend both their food cache and their entire feeding area.

When I am discovered on my stand, the squirrel that lives in the balsam thicket comes unglued. His alarm display consists of chirping and accompanying tail flicking. The chirps become increasingly explosive and progresses into barks, the tail flicks get more vigorous and stamping of the hind feet ensues. Eventually the poor creature becomes so furious he commences leaping. Squirrels lead a dramatic life.

Another fun activity I enjoy from my deer stand is to see just how close the local chickadees will come. On sunny days, a passing flock (troop) of these little birds can bring life to a corner of woods in a way that is pure pleasure to watch. Sometimes I take a handful of sunflower seeds with me to my deer stand, and string a few seeds in a line along the railing of the stand, hoping for a little entertainment from my friends.

Chickadees feed only during daylight hours, but in winter their energy demands go up and they lengthen their days both early and late to feed in the twilight. Northern populations have to withstand short days and very cold temperatures. At such times, they lower their body temperature at night, which saves on energy.

Chickadees also store food and it is written that they have exceptional memory at relocating their cached items. Their cache sites may include bark, dead leaves, lichens, knotholes, and the like. How do they relocate these sites? It appears that may involve a combination of cues including sun compass orientation and landmark information. Remarkably, chickadees also remember which sites have been emptied. They will spend more time searching at sites where higher energy food items were stored, so they evidently remember the relative quality of cached food items.

Where does a chickadee spend a cold night? They roost primarily in thick vegetation or in cavities. Oddly, they seldom roost clumped together. This explains why it is that only a bird or two seems to emerge from my balsam clump when dawn arrives.

Chickadees form pair bonds that can last for several years, and breeding pairs remain paired when in their winter flocks. Within these flocks, the males dominate the females. Dominance in males is associated with age. Dominant birds have larger territories, better access to food, and higher survival. The lifespan of the average chickadee is just 2 1/2 years. Dominant pairs of chickadees have larger clutches of young, greater hatching success, and greater nest survival. And guess what? Females prefer dominant males as mates.

These birds nest in tree cavities excavated by both members of a pair. The nest itself is built by the females, with a foundation of moss and lining of rabbit fur or deer hair. Nests are rarely used more than once.

The call of the chickadee is familiar. Most of us know the 'fee-bee' of late winter/spring, which is given mostly by males. This is a song to advertise territories and attract mates. The familiar 'chick-a-dee' call is made by males and females, for a variety of reasons. It can be given by birds that have been separated from their mate or flock. It might be made when a new food source has been found. When uttered while mobbing a predator, there may be a long string of 'dee' notes. Adult chickadees are known to make at least 16 different kinds of sounds. You might give that a little thought as you sit and contemplate the woods.

Although I sat my stand through the cold of the opening weekend, and even took a shot, I have not yet finished my hunt. Truth be known, that came as something of a relief to me, as I was not yet ready to be done. It might be chilly, but it's too soon to give up the excuse to spend this special time alone in the woods. I haven't yet watched the stars wane from a clear winter night. Or seen the sun rise set the red pine on fire. The chickadees have not yet found my string of sunflower seeds. I haven't taken my favorite walk down a long hill I know, where I'll mosey a while and then sit and see what might pop up where. A few days into the season, when the crowd thins, is a good time for that walk.

A quiet walk in the woods, alone and yet not. A chance to look around at a leisurely pace, nothing more pressing than whatever it is I bring to the day. Deer hunting? I suppose it is. And so much more.

